

Formation through misinformation: teaching Architecture as Cabaret

a paper for the
Trent Institute for Learning and Teaching
Festival of Learning 26th June 2018

Chris Heuvel FRIBA FRSA



Architect:
Luciano Pia
(25 verde -
Turin, 2013)

Intro: the academic as impresario

Professor Ubu Yurodivy

The Institute of Experimental Hermeneutics
(Heaton Library basement, Newcastle upon Tyne)

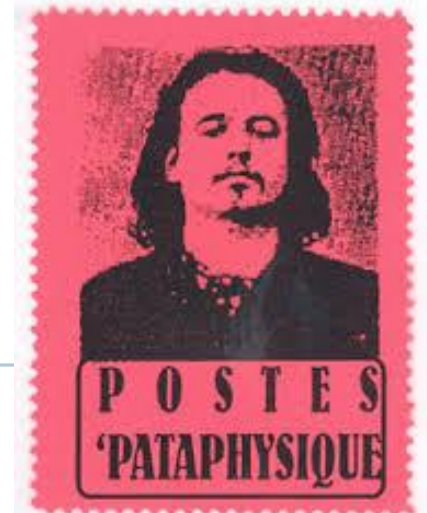
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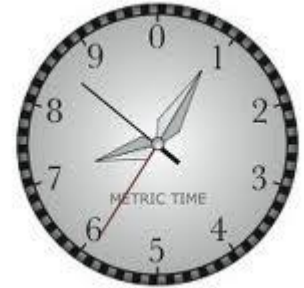
- EU directive 2011: outline proposals for the metrication of time
- 2009 exhibition: 'Re Construction – the Pataphysical Merzbau'
- BA Science Festival 2006 presentation: 'a pataphysical cosmology'
- etc



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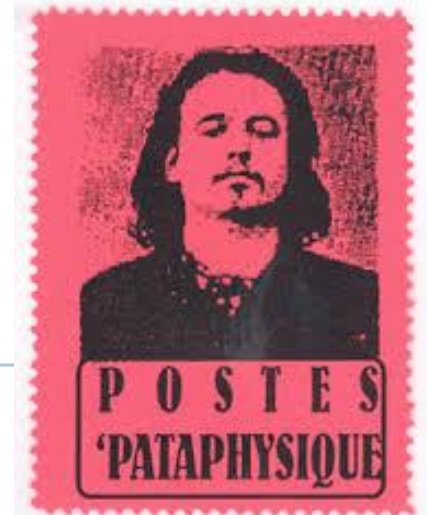
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(with no apologies for its inevitably academic character)
a module guide for part of NTU's BArch year 2:
'interdisciplinary design studies'



"When cardinals were invited to dine at the coronation of a pope, they brought their own wine and their own cup-bearer, for fear of poison."
(Bertrand Russell, 1961:489)



Module Information Sheet (MIS)information

Nottingham Trent University: BArch (Hons) Architecture

- 1 Module Title: **Interdisciplinary Design Studies**
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- 3 Credit Points: 20
- 4 Duration: 2 terms
- 5 School: Architecture, Design and the Built Environment
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Within the above framework,
I used to offer '**Architecture as Cabaret**' as a 1-term seminar option.

*"There are in our
existence spots of time
which have a resonance."
(W Wordsworth, 1835)*



Pre-, Post- and Co-Requisites



Please keep mobile phones **on** during this presentation...

Pre-, Post- and Co-Requisites



... and LapTops **on** so you can keep checking what I say
(or looking up other information on the internet etc)

*"Whatever is immediately
perceived is an idea; and **can**
any idea exist out of the mind?"*
(George Berkeley, 1713)



Overview and Aims:

On the impossibility of transgressive pedagogy

'Architecture' has no barriers

Nothing is irrelevant:

everything may be regarded as part of architecture

The counterpart = the nothingness contained by architecture,
the only part which is actually inhabitable by humans (ie useful to us).

Reflecting how **object-obsessed ontology** (OOO)
is now (at last) beginning to displace 'phenomenology'
as a critical feature of architectural design teaching:

instead of an arrogantly anthropocentric architecture of sensory onanism,
we can begin promoting **designs which have richness-in-themselves**
(by preaching the inclusion of everything – *die Weltanschung*)

On the inseparability of form and **content** / scholarship and pedagogy



This space
intentionally
left blank.

*"Space has a reality
outside our mind and
we cannot completely
prescribe its laws."
(Carl Gauss, 1830,
quoted by D Vesely,
2004:380)*



Module Content

in the context of Clement Greenberg's directive "avoid content like the plague"

NSS objective : content students –

not teacher-led 'edutainment' but teacher as *animateur* or host:

giving student-guests the responsibility for providing the materiel –

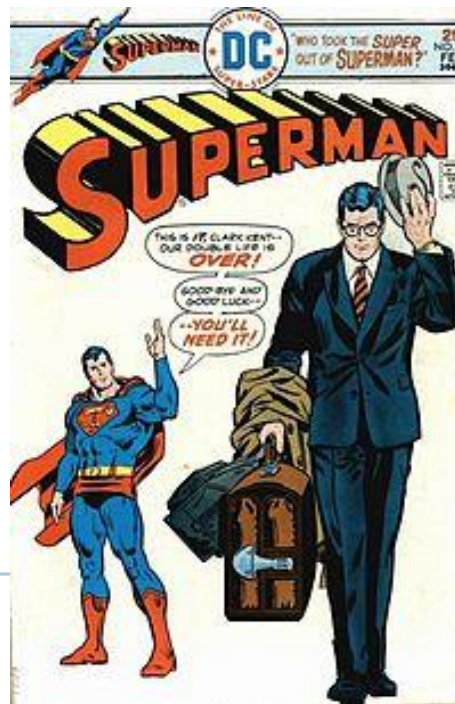
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- subversion through **initial alter-egoisation**:
if education needs to be transformative, this method offers a short cut.



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if education needs to be transformative, this method offers a short cut.
- 'truth' is not a concern – **likelihood** or even possibility is sufficient
(**speculative materielism** – a matter of Persuasion):
pushing at the open door of the students 'will to knowledge'.



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- 'truth' is not a concern – **likelihood** or even possibility is sufficient
(**speculative materielism** – a matter of Persuasion):
pushing at the open door of the students 'will to knowledge'.
- coupled with **secrecy** (**induced transcendentalism**):
"what goes on tour stays on tour" –
freeing students from anxiety about performance, criteria,
or learning outcomes, and from constraining notions of 'relevance.'



Is there more to the real than the material, or more to the material than the real?

*"To imagine an object is not to commit oneself in thought to its unreality; it is to be wholly indifferent to its reality... We do not first ascertain what the object really is and then modify it by allowing our imagination to play upon it. We first **imagine...**"*
(R G Collingwood, 1925)



Indicative Reading

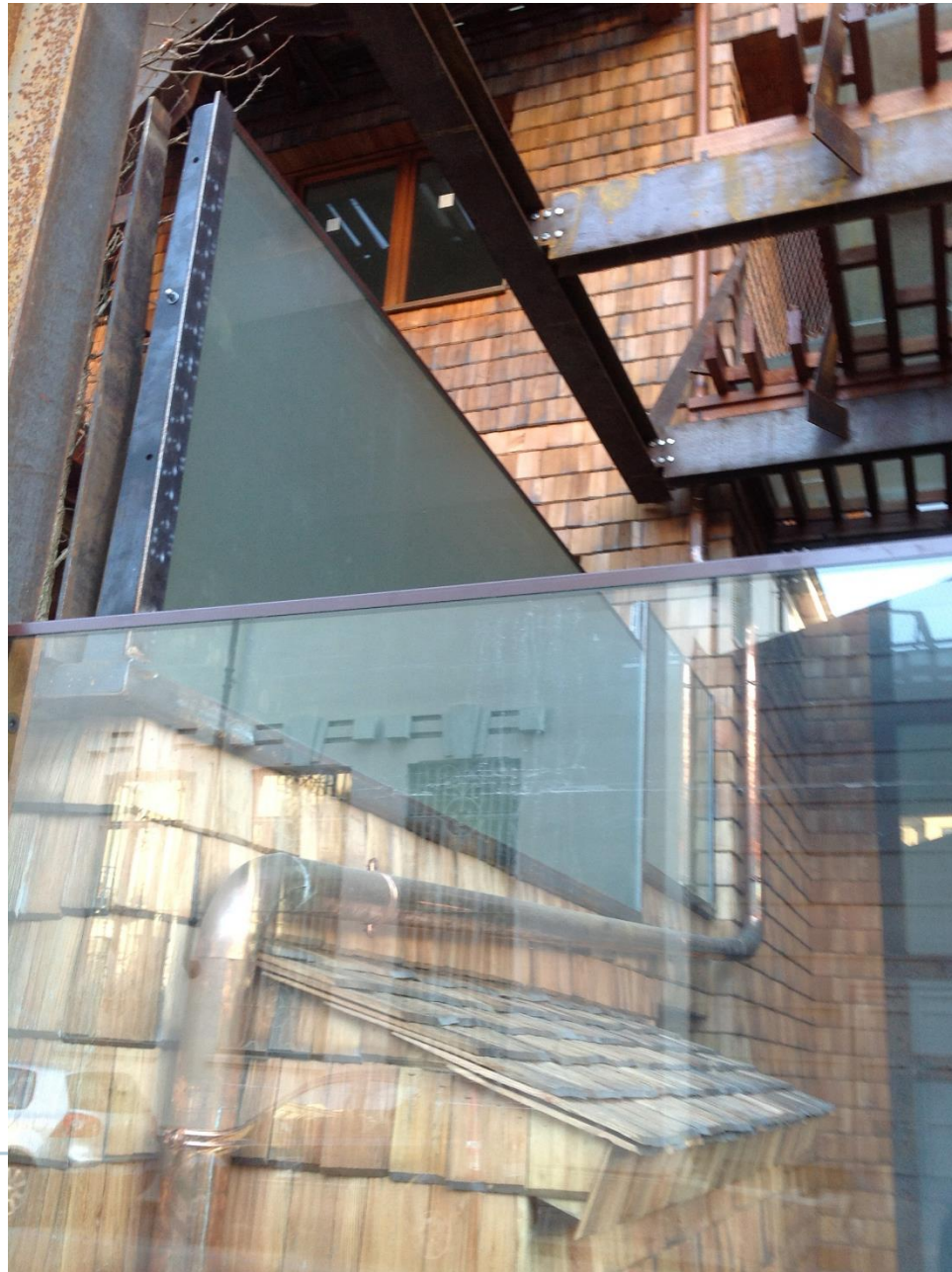
The more you look for things, the more likely you are to find them.

Anything can be found if looked for hard enough – anywhere:
it's a matter of recognition (the formation of **imaginative connections**).

- a) weekly 'workshops', based upon **seemingly convincing combinations**:
named architects, stages in the design process, factual and fictitious ideas.
- b) students select their own material and share it with one another:
nothing is ever dismissed as 'irrelevant' – every contribution has value.
- c) even **research into non-existent subject-areas** is commissioned:
students always return with answers.

...an approach routed within what **Foucault** has described as
"those shady philosophies that haunt literature, art, the sciences, law, ethics, and even man's daily life... those age-old themes that are never crystallised in a rigorous and individual system, but which have formed the spontaneous philosophy of those who did not philosophise."
(**The Archaeology of Knowledge**, 1972: 136)

"Cleverness at fighting is exhibited in the giving and parrying of blows, not in the acceptance or rejection of propositions about blows... Nor does the surgeon's skill function in his tongue uttering medical truths but only in his hands making the correct movements."
(G Ryle, 1949:48)



Learning Outcomes

Knight and Yorke, 2003:48: “a student who understands something is able to apply it appropriately to a fresh situation...or to evaluate it.”

QUITE THE OPPOSITE: after studying this module, students should be able to...

Demonstrate understanding by applying knowledge **in**appropriately, or by analysing it upon the basis of **(deliberate) ‘misconceptions’**.

- Recognise the value **of embedding ideas from other disciplines** into architectural production
- Present **unfamiliar material** convincingly, coherently and engagingly
- Enrich design proposals/critiques with **a variety of cultural cross-references** / cross-cultural references.

Le Corbusier (1923): “rewarding the desire of our eyes” –
continuously repaying the attentive glance with invitations to look again in the expectation of seeing things you hadn’t noticed before:
*the more you look **at** things, the more you see in them.*

"The artist must know how to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. From the point of view of art, there are no concrete or abstract forms, but only forms which are more or less convincing lies."
(P Picasso, 1923 – quoted by E F Fry, 1966:165)



Teaching Methods

Insidious acts of **deconstruction** recur as seminar themes – the aim being **to undermine faith in logic, science, 'materiality' etc** as a foundation for

- stimulating creativity,
- enriching architectural significance,
- enhancing the joys of architectural productivity.

QA: this is continuously/constructively tested

a) through a variety of feedback mechanisms
(including jokes, lies and fantasies)

b) through the tutor's own gratification
(the students' role during the seminars is to entertain their tutor).

The seminars ('workshops'), each fancifully identified

a) with a major architect of the last half-century, and

b) with a particular phase in the design process,

proceed through **three distinct stages:**

*"The difficulty is to
realise the
groundlessness of our
believing."*
L Wittgenstein, 1949)



Learning Methods

Phase 1: the tutor sets the example by leading the conversation through a variety of **increasingly playful and/or fictitious topics**.

- Students keep their **laptops** running while in seminar:
 - to record notes of the conversation,
 - to check on alleged facts,
 - to extend (and share) 'live' lines of interest.
- Students develop a '**wiki**' (using **PBWorks software**) as a repository of ideas to act as a resource (for the performance at the end) and operate a (private) **Facebook** page (for planning group interaction).

(this is a group-project)



"It is an uncertain object, with badly drawn frontiers, methods borrowed from here and there, and an approach lacking in rigour and certainty.. concerned with all that insidious thought, that whole interplay of representations that flow anonymously between men; in the interstices of the great discursive monuments, it reveals the crumbling soil on which they are based."
(Michel Foucault, 1972:137)



Learning Methods

Phase 2: the students are assigned prescribed topics (sometimes unreal and often obscure) to 'research' and then present for discussion.

- **No (mis)interpretations, deliberate or otherwise, are ever judged to be irrelevant or uninteresting.**

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- **No (mis)interpretations, deliberate or otherwise, are ever judged to be irrelevant or uninteresting.**
- Tutor's role: keep forming links between apparently disparate ideas, continuously steering the conversation towards an appreciation that "as there are no boundaries to the creative imagination, **nothing can be definitively excluded from the domain of architecture.**"

(there is of course **a menu**: at the outset of the programme, students are provided with a list of the key topics for discussion within each seminar session)



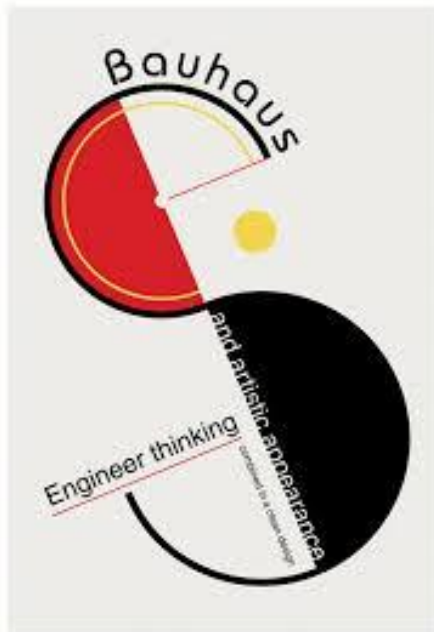
"At the heart of the Arts and Humanities disciplines sit stories – stories which create and recreate worlds, distant and present, stories which inspire and engage, stories which grow imaginations and expand what is thinkable."
(HEA, May 2013)



Assessment Methods

Phase 3 (at the end of the seminar series) - **the 'Cabaret' performance:**
the students develop some form of presentation to their colleagues
to communicate their realisation
that **there are no boundaries to the creative imagination**
(hence 'Architecture as Cabaret' – returning to our modernist roots)

theme =
'spatial
branching-
points'



Assessment Methods

- **Phase 3** (at the end of the seminar series) - the 'Cabaret' performance: the students develop some form of presentation to their colleagues to communicate their realisation that **there are no boundaries to the creative imagination**, (hence 'Architecture as Cabaret' – returning to our modernist roots).

no limitations are imposed upon the format of this final show, but ...

- Students develop their own coordinating structures:
 - eg - a chess game (breaking the rules, resulting in a staged fight),
 - the 7 deadly sins (a morality tale, with shadow-play)
 - a day in the city (a soundscape – with smells).
- Students organise roles for themselves within the troupe.
- Students devise their own marketing material, programmes, costumes, make-up, props, lighting, and even post-production publicity.

*"My sense is that every time an entity or object surprises us, we should follow it if possible, if only in principle. For these are the **temporal branching points** in which possible futures and parallel worlds are revealed to us; in which 'life' may be revealed as more than mere survival, but **the vertiginous space of inspiration, ethics, poetics and/or a radical refusal to live in a certain prescribed manner.**"*
(Dominic Pettman, 2013:53)



Feedback

Coda: research into the success of the exercise

- individually, students are required to write a short reflective account
 - of their role within the 'troupe',
 - of their contribution towards its staging and execution,
 - of lessons and insights gained from the whole exercise.
- Students consistently identified the process as one of the most important (and enjoyable) in their architectural formation – which gratifyingly corresponds with their tutor's experience.
- Trusting **you** have similarly enjoyed this somewhat academic account of '**Architecture as Cabaret**' –

as a colleague reported in a recent review of his research,
"it's not all made up... Well, some of it has to be."

Outcomes

conduct research into the success of the exercise

Students are required to write a short reflective account

- of their experience within the 'troupe',
- of their attitudes towards its staging and execution,
- of lessons learned from the whole exercise.

Students consistently regard the process as one of the most important (and enjoyable) in their architectural education – which gratifyingly corresponds to their own experience.

Trusting you have similarly enjoyed this somewhat academic account of 'Architectural Hermeneutics' –

as a colleague reported in a recent review of the process (it's not all made up... Well, some of it has to be.)



"No this is not yet a city, it's an idea, it's a fury of interminable construction. Nothing but Pelions and Ossas. The idea is at the end to build the city one day on the summit of the heap."
(Hélène Cixous, 1999)

(If you have been) thank you for listening,
and I hope you've enjoyed my architecturally transgressive pictures.